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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was threefold: (1) to review the literature; (2) to determine the effects of the use of humor upon stress within the classroom; and (3) to examine the extent to which students and teachers use humor as a coping mechanism to deal with stressful school situations. It was hypothesized that humor in the classroom is effective in reducing the stress and tension of both teachers and students and is, therefore, an important classroom management technique. Two groups of subjects participated in the study. One group was composed of 9- to 11-year-old students (N=98). Twenty-three fifth- and sixth-grade teachers comprised the second group. All subjects completed an adapted version of Martin & Lefcourt's (1983) Coping Humor Scale, a survey concerning the use of humor in coping with stressful school situations. According to the data analysis, results supported the hypothesis for both groups. However, a slightly greater use of humor as a coping mechanism was reported by teachers. A developmental sequence of humor behavior and a copy of the survey instrument are appended. Six tables depict the number and percentage of students/teachers who selected each response, the number and percentages of combined subjects who selected each response, and the total percentage of teachers versus students who selected each response. (Contains 27 references.) (Author/LL)

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Reducing Stress and Tension in the Classroom Through the Use of Humor

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Running head: REDUCING STRESS AND TENSION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of the use of humor upon stress within the classroom. Two groups of subjects participated in this study. One group was composed of ninety-eight nine to eleven year old students from a school in the Northern tip of Virginia. Twenty-three fifth and sixth grade teachers from a school in Central Virginia comprised the second group. All subjects were tested using an adapted version of Martin & Lefcourt's (1983) Coping Humor Scale. This survey contains seven statements concerning humor's use in coping with stressful school situations. The subject's used a four point scale and responded in accordance to their agreement or disagreement with each of the seven statements. It was hypothesized that humor in the classroom is effective in reducing the stress and tension of both teachers and students and is; therefore, an important classroom management technique. Results supported the hypothesis for both groups. However, a slightly greater use of humor as a coping mechanism was reported by the teachers.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PROBLEM

How should we reduce stress in the classroom?

How to maintain interest, create a positive environment, and minimize discipline problems is one dilemma educators will more than likely face at some point in their career. One barrier to obtaining these goals is stress in the classroom. As educators, we must remember that we see the students for only a few hours each day- less than one-third of the day. Therefore, it is readily apparent that a large portion of their lives occur outside our classroom. Unfortunately, due to the changing structure of contemporary society, much of this time is filled with stress for these young adults. Life may be a very stressful experience for many children who are dealing with divorce, poverty, and a multitude of other social ills. Sadly, today's reality of public schools is that a large portion of the students carry a great deal of "extra baggage" into our classrooms everyday. These

circumstances alone could prove to be overwhelming for young adults.

However, the stress and tension present in their lives does not terminate there. Instead, there exists a great deal of strain inherent in the classroom. Such stresses naturally arise from both the structure of the educational system and the act of growing up as a social being. Some sources of this tension are grades, homework assignments, peer pressure, self-confidence, etc. It would seem to be a fruitless effort to even attempt to teach without first reducing some of the student's stress. Of course, there is little which may be done by the teacher about the outside sources which exert their influence on the students; however, we do have some control over the sources within our own classrooms. One way for a teacher to diffuse this stress is through effective classroom management. However, not all techniques will aid in achieving the desired end of diffused tension. For example, strict authoritarian discipline may lead to an increase in the tension.

There exist a number of psychological theories and

research studies which document the psychological as well as physiological benefits of humor as a stress reducer. This positive impact of humor upon stress has long been prevalent with psychologists in studies of therapy patients, hospitalized children, etc. Recently, the educational world has begun to collect evidence concerning positive applications of humor within the classroom. Yet, more research needs to be done to determine if the use of humor has similar effects on the stress levels of both teachers and students. I hope that by looking at both groups' use of humor as a coping strategy, I may shed some light on this subject.

As with any other classroom management technique, there are suggestions and limitations to consider when using humor as a technique which I will try to highlight. I realize that not everyone is comfortable with the use of humor as it may not be a natural component of their personality. I am not advocating the forced use of such a technique or simply telling jokes during class. But, if this study does find a positive effect for humor as a coping mechanism

against stress, I hope teachers will utilize what natural abilities they posses to incorporate humor as a means of creating a positive learning environment for their students.

B. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to assess the effects of the use of humor upon the stress within the classroom. This study will look at the extent to which students and teachers use humor as a coping mechanism to deal with stressful school situations. The primary focus will be to show whether or not humor serves as an effective classroom management technique which has the capacity to reduce teacher's and student's school related stress.

C. HYPOTHESIS

I predict that the use of humor in the classroom is effective in reducing the stress and tension of both students and teachers and is; therefore, an important classroom management technique. The idea of this topic

developed from my student teaching experience. I was placed in an upper elementary school which contained all fifth and sixth graders within the city. The population was extremely diverse and contained students from all socio-economic levels and backgrounds. A large percentage of this population was composed of at-risk children. These children carried many problems with them to school.

Another factor was the departmentalized nature of the school. These fifth graders, who came from self-contained elementary schools, were suddenly required to change classes six or seven times per day at this school. It became very apparent that some of these students were feeling the pressure and tension caused by this new situation. At times, it seemed overwhelming for these students and they were often unable to perform in their classes due to this stress. However, my Clinical Instructor rather than disciplining them by sending these already overwhelmed students to the office, responded compassionately to their problems. I was amazed at the calm yet controlled flow of her classroom. She handled these

students very effectively, often times using humor with them. The power and effectiveness of this technique struck me and lead to the formation of my hypothesis for this study.

D. OVERVIEW

This study will begin by outlining the history of research concerning humor's use as a tension diffuser. It will examine numerous psychological theories, research studies, and psychological and physiological benefits of humor. The latest research on educational applications and findings on the benefits within the classroom will also be assessed. Finally, cautions and limitations for humor's use within the classroom will be discussed. Part II will present the literature which will support my hypothesis. Part III will introduce the design of the study. This will include a clear description of the subjects, including age, and status (teacher vs. student). Next, the survey which will be utilized to test my construct will be presented and explained. The design of the study, including how I went about analyzing the data will follow. All

conclusions which I draw from this study will then be discussed. Finally, I will present suggestions and guidelines for the educator's use of humor in the classroom.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Martin (1988) contends that nurturing a child's sense of humor may arm them with a coping skill to fight the stresses of life. Beliefs of this beneficial use of humor date back as far as Freud (1928) who labeled humor as, "the highest of the defensive processes (i.e., defense mechanisms)" (Lefcourt, 1960, p.233). In his analysis of humor in 1932, Freud went on to explain humor as a reflection of the confidence in one's ability to reduce stress to a manageable state. Similarly, laughter was seen as a means of burning off extra energy or tension (Martin & Lefcourt). Rollo May (1953) attributed this stress reducing effect of humor to its capability of allowing people to put distance between themselves and the problem at hand (Martin, 1988). Recently, ideas such

as these concerning the benefits of humor as a stress reducer have been adapted to pertain to our school's classrooms. As Peter Woods stated (1979) laughter "is the means by which pupils... displace the grimness, the sourness, and hostility that impinges upon them and makes their school lives more palatable, even enjoyable" (Gibbon, 1988, p.209). Therefore, humor's effectiveness as a classroom management technique rests upon its capacity to serve as a coping mechanism to combat stress.

The inclusion of several definitions is necessary at this point due to the wide usage throughout the literature of some potentially confusing terminology. When humor is described as a means of coping, this sense of coping is "any effort to reduce, tolerate, or transcend the demands that are created by stressful transactions" (Martin, 1988, p.137). Such coping is thought to arise to combat the stress placed upon an individual. Stress is defined as, "a set of adverse physiological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to events or institutions that are perceived by the individual as threatening to his/her well-being

and taxing his/her coping abilities" (Martin, 1988, p.137).

While both of these psychological constructs adhere to specific meanings, due to the highly personal nature of its interpretation, "humor" evades a concise definition. Essentially, it is a multifaceted (Hebert, 1991), specifically human (Hester, 1987), and contagious (Goor, 1989) phenomenon. Although the definition of this word is distinct for each person, Goor (1989) in his observations of teachers and the principal in a suburban public school conceptualized humor as the image of a circle with three parts: intellectual, spiritual, and physical (Goor, 1989).

Intellectually, he defined humor as the appreciation of the amusing. In relation to schools, it is this part which contributes to the establishment of a balanced, positive school climate (Goor, 1989). Spiritually, humor involves the union formed between people as they look at the "light side" of experiences (Goor, 1989). It is that aspect of humor which helps teachers and students establish effective and understanding relationships with each other. Finally,

he discovered the physical sector of laughter. This act brings about the release of tension and stress. This aids in the removal of obstacles which hinder the learning process (Goor, 1989). It is this portion of the definition which has the greatest implications for successful classroom management.

Discussion of such implications may be divided into five headings: Psychological theories of humor, Physiological and psychological explanations of humor's ability to reduce stress, Research evidence, Classroom use of humor, and Cautions and limitations to humor's use within the classroom.

Psychological Theories of Humor

It is highly documented that Freud was one of the earliest writers to classify humor as a coping device (Hebert, 1991). Following this strain of thought, he was the most well-known proponent of the Relief Theory which is one of the three psychological theories developed to shed light upon humor's liberating effects. This theory relies upon physiological explanations for the affective function of humor. According to proponents of this view, the central

element is the release of surplus nervous energy which results in the reduction of tension and anxiety (Hebert, 1991).

Similarly, Spencer (1860) developed the Arousal Theory which explains laughter's function as that of reducing built-up tension or energy (Martin & Lefcourt, 1986). This helps to account for the stress-reducing effects of humor. If stress involves the increase in tension, and humor and laughter function to reduce such tension, it should follow that humor reduces the accumulated effects of stress (Martin & Lefcourt, 1986).

The Superiority Theory of coping focuses upon the heightened sense of self-esteem, confidence, and reduced threat that are coupled with a humorous response to a typically stressful experience or situation (Martin & Lefcourt, 1988). Each of these three theories presents physiological as well as psychological explanations as to why humor and laughter may be beneficial to one's health in serving to cope with stress.

Humor viewed as such a coping strategy clearly

produces valuable effects in each of the three coping domains: emotion, appraisal, and problem-focused. As emotion-focused coping, laughter produces a cathartic effect by discharging built-up tension and emotions (Martin, 1988). While such a view concentrates solely upon the results of the physical act of laughter, the Appraisal-focused coping explains humor's psychological impact. According to this view, a humorous reply to a stressful experience or situation may equip a person with the ability to reappraise or examine the situation from a less stressful perspective (Martin, 1988). Rollo May (1953) seemed to comment upon this view when he said that humor "...is the healthy way of feeling a 'distance' between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective" (Martin, 1988, p.138).

Although this allows for a reduction of the stressful situation through the means of altered thinking, Problem-focused coping actually allows for an alteration in the stressful situation itself. Particularly those involving interpersonal tension and conflict (Martin, 1988). It permits people to laugh at

themselves thereby reducing the tension of exchanges with other people (Martin, 1988).

Physiological and Psychological Explanations of Humor's Ability to Reduce Stress

Humor and laughter are key ingredients in maintaining physiological and psychological well-being when facing stress. "After a good laugh, we feel more relaxed; we are relieved of tension born of immediate or long-term stress. We sigh, breathe more deeply and feel renewed. Our mood is positive and spirits are high" (Cornett, 1986, p.30). Many well-known theorists, Spencer (1860), Darwin (1872), and Dearbon (1990) have identified and documented the feelings of well-being produced by laughter (Gibbon, 1988). More recently, others have praised "laughing at life's problems" as a great stress reducer (Curwin & Mendler, 1990. p.74). However, we need not base such claims simply upon the subjective experience of feelings which accompany a good laugh, there does exist a physiological explanation for such feelings of well-being.

Humor and laughter are healthy. A good laugh

improves blood flow, increases oxygen in the blood, exercises lungs, diaphragm, and face muscles, and releases a natural pain killer into the body's system (Cornett, 1986). In addition, due to the increase in endorphine secretion, pain is decreased and pleasure is increased (Hebert, 1991). This increased feeling of exhilaration may be accounted for by using a chemical explanation. Laughing provokes the production of catecholamine, which increases alertness. In addition, the cholesterol which is produced during stressful times stops being produced (Cornett, 1986). Each of these paths leads to reduced feelings of stress and tension. If pleasure, exhilaration, and alertness are increased, it is only logical to experience a decrease in tension and stress as these two are incompatible states.

There also exists a psychological explanation for this feeling of well-being experienced after using humor to cope with stress. Individuals who commonly utilize humor in everyday situations may actually build a protective layer of positive emotion around themselves. Such a barrier is incompatible with

feelings of anger, stress, etc. (McGhee, 1988). Therefore, the use of humor builds a form of barrier against stress and tension within the person's mind.

Research Evidence

It is relatively easy for theorists and psychologists to propose and document explanations for humor's effectiveness as a coping mechanism against stress. However, what works in theory is not necessarily what will work in practice. Therefore, several studies have looked at these psychological theories about the notion of humor's effectiveness as a stress reducer.

In Hester's study (1987) of the use of humor, it was found that 61% of the younger subjects reported the release of tension to be their first choice for use of humor. For the older subjects, the percentage was 38 (Hester, 1987).

In another study, Gibbon (1988) reported the effective use of humor to reduce tension in children undergoing therapy (Gibbon, 1988). In this stressful situation, the children used the humor as a defense with which to master the anxiety inherent in the

situation. They may also reduce interpersonal tension by removing any obstacles between themselves and the therapist to create a friendly atmosphere (Gibbon, 1988). These findings seem to have direct implications for the school situation.

Babad (1969) performed a study designed to look at the personality correlates of humor. The categories of humor personality correlates relevant to the results are the nonhumorous and the producer and reproducer (active) groups. The nonhumorous group exhibited no willingness to laugh, create humor, or look for humorous situations. The reproducers and producers were essentially humorous people who enjoyed humor and actively engaged in humorous situations and the act of laughing. The results of the study displayed a significant effect with lower anxiety scores for the producer group than the nonhumorous group. In essence, the findings showed a decrease in anxiety as one moved from the nonhumorous group to the active humorous groups (Babad, 1969).

In their study of humor as a moderator of stress and moods, Martin and Lefcourt (1983) found support for

their hypothesis stating that humor reduces the impact of stress. The correlations between life stress and mood disturbance were significantly greater for those subjects who received lower humor scores than for subjects with higher scores (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983). The results from all of these studies lend support to the notion that humor reduces stress.

Classroom Use of Humor

The laughter and humor expressed by young children is produced very naturally and easily (Chenfeld, 1990). It seems to be inherent in their nature. Therefore, this poses a challenge for us as educators to become active participants in the humor as well. This will provide a means for becoming engaged with the students. We are all aware of the power that a humorous response exerts over a tense situation (Ackerman & Dummer, 1982). It makes us feel more comfortable in situations in which we would normally feel as if we were not entirely in control of our feelings (Ackerman & Dummer, 1982). Pollard (1984) praises the need for humor and laughter in the lives of our students. Humor "...has a central place whether as a natural product or as a

life-saving response to the exigencies of the institution - boredom, ritual, routine, regulations, oppressive authority" (Gibbon, 1988, p.213). Essentially, the primary value of humor in the classroom is to "stimulate, illustrate, motivate, and ease tension" (Kelly, 1983, p.8). It is important to note that the reduced tension effects and creates benefits in other areas as well.

One area in which humor serves to diffuse tension is interpersonal relationships. Often in classrooms, power struggles surface. When two sides come into conflict, humor can be used to relieve the pressure and provide both opponents with the opportunity to "cool off" (Curwin, 1990). It is hard to maintain such anger when you are smiling or laughing. Similarly, in such situations, humor provides the teacher with the chance to rethink the situation and react with a rational consequence as opposed to a punishment established out of stress and anger. Such a rational response spares the child's self-esteem (Curwin, 1990). As a result of the ability to diffuse tension in such situations, humor actually enhances relationships and brings people

closer together (Curwin, 1990). "When humor is shared, people feel close and warm with each other" (Chenfeld, 1990, p.59). So the bottom line is that utilizing humor to reduce stress makes school a more enjoyable experience for both teachers and students (Sullivan, 1992).

A large reason for this increased enjoyment of school is the positive attitude and learning climate created as a result of the reduced stress level. By reducing stress, humor can make learning more enjoyable which in turn leads to a more relaxed atmosphere as well as positive attitudes about school. Such positive attitudes help to reinforce the notion that school and learning do not have to be boring and uninteresting (Kelly, 1983).

A teacher who shares a warm, genuine sense of humor with the class portrays themself as being human just like the students (Hebert, 1991). This ability by the teacher to laugh at themselves transmits the idea to students of sharing a common emotion or ability. Essentially, this breaks down the barriers which often place teachers on a higher authoritative level and;

therefore, reduces the tension which may be caused by the students' feelings of inferiority and powerlessness (Gibbon, 1988). Such diffusion of tension leads to a multitude of mediating factors which when combined lead to a more positive learning climate.

First, by reducing the stress and tension, humor makes the classroom more enjoyable or fun. This in turn seems to meet one of what Glasser sees as the four basic psychological needs, that being the need for fun. According to Glasser, these psychological needs take precedence over the survival needs. The remaining three needs are love, power, and freedom (Gough, 1987). If the classroom is more enjoyable, students will want to be there. This will logically reduce behavior and discipline problems thereby increasing listening and retention (Sullivan, 1992). Goor (1989) speaks of humor's use as an alternative to authoritarian discipline. It serves the dual purpose of maintaining order as well as a pleasant learning atmosphere. When taken together, all of these benefits lead to a positive learning climate in which the obstacles to learning are removed (Goor, 1989).

Not only are the factors which make learning difficult removed, but humor may actually work to facilitate learning at certain levels. One such area is that of developing higher order thinking skills. Humor while breaking down stress, acts as an elixir which soothes the mind into thinking more clearly about higher order relationships, etc. (Hebert, 1991). There also exists evidence from a study done by Sarason (1960) that highly anxious students perform better on tests when humor is introduced into the testing situation (Gibbon, 1988).

Looking at the numerous benefits which humor may have on the classroom learning environment provides great support for its implementation as a management technique. However, as with any other teaching method or procedure, humor must be used properly in order for the teachers to reap the benefits.

. Cautions and Limitations to Humor's Use Within the Classroom

Humor has been praised as a great liberator (Cornett, 1986). Applying the findings and theories of many psychologists and researchers to the school

classroom may exert a positive influence in reducing the stress and establishing a positive learning environment. Yet, teachers must be very cautious to be certain that their use of humor is the gentle spontaneity, joy, and playfulness of harmless humor rather than the insult, embarrassment, and hurt of tendentious humor (Gibbon, 1988).

Such purposeless humor should be avoided as it wastes time and may even distract students (Harris, 1984). One type of this tendentious humor is sarcasm. This hostile, painful approach may have numerous negative effects one of which is damaging a child's already fragile self-esteem. Another form of humor which may result in the same situation is ridicule (Bryant & Zillman). Similarly, joking about a student's name may not only have negative ramifications for their self concept (Sullivan, 1992), but may also be aimless and irrelevant to the classroom situation.

Although, there are no definite guidelines for humor's use in the classroom, several important considerations do exist. As educators, we need to avoid excessive use of humor (McGhee, 1988).

Similarly, the developmental level of the students is of primary importance in deciding upon humor's use. Humor which is too simple or incomprehensible may confuse the students or teach them inaccurate information (Bryant & Zillman).

A developmental sequence of humor has been established from the cognitive stage theories of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Jane Loevinger as well as the work of Paul McGhee. Refer to Appendix A.

Insert Appendix A about here

Development of humor progresses from a visual focus to a verbal focus. Basically, there is a movement toward objectivity, apparent in one's ability to laugh at oneself and at life's circumstances. Familiarity with these developmental stages allows teachers to select and utilize appropriate humor within the classroom (Cornett, 1986).

Humor can be a liberating force, or it can be a destroying one. If used at the wrong time, it has the ability to cause distraction. If used in excess, it

may become uncontrollable and transform the classroom into a circus. And if used inappropriately, it may potentially hurt self-esteem, feelings, or cause embarrassment (Bariaud, 1988). Clearly, the misuse or abuse of humor in the classroom may have negative effects. But, when used appropriately, the benefits become apparent.

The purpose of this study is to look more extensively at one such advantage. Numerous psychological researchers have found humor's effects on reduced stress and tension. This study will apply such findings to the classroom situation and look at humor's effectiveness as a coping mechanism to deal with school stress as reported by both teachers and students.

III. DESIGN OF THE STUDY

A. SAMPLE

Group A

Ninety-eight students ages nine to eleven participated in this study. All were students at an elementary school in the Northern tip of Virginia at

the time the study was conducted. The population of the school was composed of students from all socio-economic levels and backgrounds. The only specific requirement for subjects was parental consent to participate.

Group B

Twenty-three fifth and sixth grade teachers participated in this study. All taught at an upper elementary school in central Virginia at the time the study was conducted. The student population of this school was similar to that of the subjects in Group A. These subjects participated on a voluntary basis.

B. MEASURES

All subjects were tested using a seven item survey dealing with the use of humor as a coping mechanism in school situations. This survey was an adapted version of Martin & Lefcourt's (1983) Coping Humor Scale. Refer to Appendix B.

Insert Appendix B about here

Each of the seven items contained a statement. The subjects were to read each statement and circle the appropriate response. Responses were in the form of the numbers one through four with one being strongly disagree, two being mildly disagree, three being mildly agree, and four being strongly agree. This survey was utilized to assess the frequency with which subjects reported using humor to cope with stress in school situations.

C. DESIGN

This study employed a between-subjects design. The independent variable was status with two groups: teachers and students. The dependent variable was response to questions. The four levels of response were: strongly agree, mildly agree, strongly disagree, and mildly disagree. The subjects in Group A each received a parental consent form with a copy of the survey. Any students who did not receive parental consent were excluded from the study. Each participant received a copy of the survey which was read to them. This was intended to ensure that all students

understood each statement, and prevented the exclusion of any student with poor reading skills. In all cases, each subject responded to each statement. This consisted of circling the number one through four which described their agreement or disagreement with the statement. The survey and choice of responses were identical for each subject. Once the ninety-eight subjects with parental consent completed the survey, they were collected. Next, data was tallied to determine the number of students who circled each response for the seven statements. Responses to each statement were counted to determine the number of students who responded with each of the four choices. These results are illustrated in Table 1. Next, the numbers were converted into percentages by dividing the number of students who selected each response by the total number of students. These scores told of the percentage of students who selected each response for all seven items on the survey. These figures were then compiled and displayed in Table 2.

The procedure for Group B differed somewhat. A brief letter with directions was attached to surveys

and placed in the mailboxes of thirty-five teachers at an upper elementary school. Teachers participated on a voluntary basis and were given one week to complete the survey and return it to the appropriate box. Within the week, twenty-three teachers completed and returned the survey. The seven statements and response choices were identical to those utilized by all subjects in Group A. Once all surveys were collected, data was tallied to determine the number of teachers who circled each response for the seven statements. Responses to each statement were counted to determine the number of teachers who responded with each of the four choices. These results are illustrated in Table 3. Next, the numbers were converted into percentages by dividing the number of teachers who selected each response by the total number of teachers. These scores told of the percentage of teachers who selected each response for all seven items on the survey. These figures were then compiled and are displayed in Table 4.

Next, the number of responses chosen by teachers and students for each item were combined to arrive at an overall number. Once these were compiled in table

format, a percentage for combined selection of each response for each question was calculated. To determine the percentage of response from the total number of responses, the number of subjects was multiplied by 7 (number of items on the survey) ,this will be called variable P. Next, the total number of times each response was selected was calculated, variable T. This number was then divided by 100 to yield the percentage of response from the total number of responses. Therefore:

$$T/P \times 100 = \% \text{ of response}$$

For example, for teachers the total number of responses =23 (subjects) x 7 (items on the survey) = 161. Response #1 was selected a total of 14 times from a possible 161 times. Therefore, 14/161 x 100 = 9%. Nine percent of the responses were #1, or strongly disagree for Group B.

After all data was calculated and compiled, the figures were compared and analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

D. ANALYSIS

Once all data was collected, the percentages of both teachers and students who selected each response were compared. The primary interest was in the percentage of subjects from each group who reported using humor to cope with school related stress. Since the response choices were separated along lines of agreement and disagreement with statements, I looked at the comparisons between those categories. The two responses which were most relevant to my hypothesis were #1, strongly disagree, and #4, strongly agree. When the differences between these two were not large enough to draw conclusions, the #1 and #2 (disagree responses) were looked at together as were the #3 and #4 (agree responses). The greater percentage of #4 responses (strongly agree) would represent the utilization of humor to cope with stress. The higher percentage of #1 (strongly disagree) would represent the absence of humor as a coping mechanism. The percentages of these responses were compared for each of the seven items for each group separately. Finally, the percentages of the two groups of responses were

compared to each other and compiled in Table 6.

E. SUMMARY

The next chapter will cover the analysis of results. Several tables will be utilized to illustrate the results of the data collected. Analysis will begin with the results of Group A, or the students. The tables illustrating the number and percentage of students who selected each response for each question will be discussed. The results for each of the seven items on the survey will be discussed individually. Percentages of #1 responses vs. #4 responses will be compared to determine which percentage is higher. If there is not a large difference between the two, the #2 responses will be added to #1 and #3 will be added to #4. The higher percent will help to draw conclusions concerning the use of humor as a coping mechanism. A higher percentage of #3 and #4 responses will represent the use of humor as a coping mechanism whereas, a greater percentage of #1 and #2 responses will represent the opposite. The percentages for each response to each item will be compared for both groups

individually.

Next, the data for the two groups will be combined to yield overall percentage scores of the frequency with which each response was selected by all subjects. These numbers will represent the total percentage of subjects (teachers and students) who selected each response for each of the seven items. This will eliminate group differences by combining the two groups of subjects into one sample. Analysis of these numbers will help to determine major differences between the agree and disagree responses for each statement. This may pinpoint certain statements to look at in drawing conclusions. Table 5 will be provided to illustrate the number and percentages for each response for this combined group.

Finally, the data will be compared for the two groups. This will consist of looking at the total percentage from each group who selected each response. These percentages will be compiled in Table 6.

IV. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results obtained from the study lend support

to my hypothesis for both groups of subjects. I predicted that humor in the classroom is effective in reducing stress and tension of both students and teachers and is; therefore, an important classroom management technique. First, analysis of results for Groups A and B will be presented and discussed individually. Refer to Tables 1-4.

Insert Tables 1-4 about here

Table 1 contains the number of students, from the total of ninety-eight, who selected each response for each of the seven items. The statement's numbers are located at the top of the table with the four response numbers running down along the right-hand side. The last column to the right is a total column showing the sum of each response for all seven items. Table 3 contains the number of teachers, from the twenty-three, who selected each response for each of the seven items. The table is set up in a manner identical to that of Table 1. Tables 2 and 4 are also set up in the same manner, yet contain the percentage of responses for

each item rather than the number for students and teachers.

Statement 1: "I often lose my sense of humor when I am having problems."

Sixteen percent of the students selected the strongly disagree response while twenty-six percent selected the strongly agree response. The largest percentage of responses fell in the "mildly agree" category. This 43% represents almost half of the students who report losing their sense of humor when having problems. The results for the teachers seem to be the reverse situation. The higher percentage of responses was for the strongly disagree response with 22% vs. only 13% for the strongly agree response. This supports the notion that when faced with problems, teachers maintain their sense of humor. Therefore, it may be that they have equipped themselves with this ability as a coping mechanism.

Statement 2: "I have often found that my problems at school have been reduced when I tried to find something funny in them."

Once again, the larger percentage of students selected the strongly agree response as compared to the strongly disagree response with percentages of 35 and 21 respectively. This means that over one-third of the students report that their school problems are reduced when they use humor (find something funny in them). The results become more convincing when adding the mildly agree 26% response rate. This shows that more than one-half of the students agree, either mildly or strongly, that humor helps to reduce their school related problems. The results for teachers are even more overwhelming. None of the subjects in this group disagreed with this statement. That means that 100% of the teachers reported that humor helps to reduce their school problems. The break down for results of this statement are 57% strongly agree and 43% mildly agree with the statement. The results of this statement for both groups strongly support the hypothesis concerning humor's effectiveness as a coping mechanism.

Statement 3: "I usually look for something comical to say when I am in tense situations at school".

Nineteen percent of the students strongly disagreed with this statement, while 32% strongly agreed. Once again, nearly one-third reported utilizing humor as a technique for alleviating the tension of school situations. The percentages for teachers who strongly disagreed and strongly agreed were both 9%. Since these results are identical, looking more closely at the other two response categories may help to shed some light upon results. Combining both agreed, strongly and mildly, categories yields a score of 66% and the combined disagreed categories score is 35%. These combined scores help one to conclude that the percentage of teachers who agreed to using humor in tense situations was about one-third greater than those who disagreed with humor's use in such situations.

Statement 4: "I must admit my school life would be easier if I had more of a sense of humor."

Only 27% of students strongly agreed with this statement as compared to 32% who strongly disagreed. The results look very similar for teachers, with 22%

strongly agreeing and 30% strongly disagreeing. The differences between the percentages for the two responses for each group become more interesting when combining the two agree and two disagree categories. Under this condition, nearly 50% agree and 50% disagree with the statement for both groups.

Statement 5: "I have often felt that if I am in a situation at school where I have had to either cry or laugh, it is better to laugh."

The results to this statement lend strong support to the hypothesis. Fifty-nine percent of the students strongly agreed with the statement. When this percentage is combined with the mildly agree response rate, this shoots up to 80%. This represents 4/5 of the students who report the use of humor rather than tears in tense/stressful situations. The percentages for teachers are even more overwhelming. One hundred percent of teachers agreed with this statement, either strongly or mildly. However, the largest percentage, 74%, fell in the strongly agree category. Such findings support the use and effectiveness of humor in stressful situations.

Statement 6: "I can usually find something to laugh or joke about even in trying situations."

The student response for this statement was 33% who strongly agreed compared to 15% who strongly disagreed. When the strongly and mildly agree categories were combined, the percentage becomes 69%. Therefore, well over one-half of the students report employing their sense of humor when in tense situations. The teachers reported this use of humor as a coping strategy at a much higher rate than did the students. Their combined agree responses yielded a response rate of 87%. Whereas, 0% strongly disagreed and 13% mildly disagreed. By looking at the results for this statement for each group one may conclude that when faced with tense/stressful situations, the majority of the subjects look for something humorous. This search for something funny may be their coping mechanism to reduce stress.

Statement 7: "I have found that humor helps me cope with my school problems."

This statement has the greatest implications for this study and seems to provide the strongest support

for the hypothesis. This statement directly questions the effectiveness of humor as a coping strategy. Forty percent of the students strongly agreed with this item, whereas only 16% strongly disagreed. For the teachers, 87% strongly agreed while 0% strongly disagreed. When looking at the combined agreed categories, the scores for students and teachers are 73% and 100% respectively. Therefore, as stated in the hypothesis, humor is an effective coping strategy to alleviate school stress. Such high percentages may elude to the effectiveness of this coping mechanism. The fact that nearly 3/4 of the students and 100% of the teachers report that humor helps them cope with school problems seems to be evidence for its effectiveness. If the benefits were unfounded, the percentage of people who use humor in this capacity would be expected to be much smaller.

The percentage of each response for each item are combined for the two groups in Table 5. Refer to Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

These figures were determined by combining the two groups to make one sample of 121 subjects and then tallying the number of times each response was chosen for each of the seven items. These numbers were then each divided by 121 (sample size) and multiplied by 100 to yield a percentage.

By looking at these percentages, there are three questions which seem to show greater differences between the agree and disagree responses. Statement #2 yields a combined strongly agree rate of 39%. Whereas, the strongly disagree percentage is only 17%. This is less than half of that of the agree response. These results appear to lend support to the hypothesis of the study. Thirty-nine percent of the subjects directly report the effectiveness of using humor to cope with stress.

The results of statement #5 are particularly interesting. This statement received a strongly agree response rate of 62% compared to the strongly disagree

rate of only 6%. Since this statement dealt with crying vs. laughing in difficult situations, the large agree percentage may be due to social norms concerning behavior. For the students, at the ages of 9-11, it is considered more acceptable by the peer group to laugh rather than cry. Crying as a result of a stressful situation rather than an injury, pain, etc. may lead to much ridicule for the students. Similarly, teachers may feel the pressures of being a role model for these students and may; therefore, be reluctant to cry in front of them. They may feel as if they must maintain the strong, adult role before the class.

The results of statement #7 also show a large contrast between the strongly agree and strongly disagree categories. The combined group's percentage of strongly agree response was 49% compared to 13% who reported strongly disagreeing with the statement. This illustrates the fact that just under one-half of all subjects report the effectiveness of humor as a means to cope with school related stress. When both the mildly and strongly agree responses are combined, they yield a score of 78%. Such results lend support for

the hypothesis of the study.

Table 6 illustrates the percent of each group who selected each response. Refer to Table 6.

Insert Table 6 about here

Comparing the percentages of strongly agree to those of strongly disagree, helps to illustrate support for humor's effectiveness as a coping strategy to reduce school related stress. Due to the structure of the statements, the #4 responses (strongly agree) support the use of humor as a coping mechanism. Whereas, #1 (strongly disagree) responses will illustrate lack of support for such effects. Therefore, a greater percentage of #4 (agreement) responses will lend support for the hypothesis.

Both groups report agreement with the use of humor as an effective coping strategy. For teachers, agreement was 42%, nearly five times that of the 9% who disagree will humor's use in such a capacity. The percentage for students is not as strong, but still provides support for the hypothesis. Thirty-six

percent of students provide support for the effectiveness of humor in combating stress which is twice that of the 18% who lack support. The combined agreement response rates for teachers and students are 79% and 66% respectively. This means that well over 50% of both groups agree with statements that relate to humor's capacity to reduce stress and tension in numerous school situations. These results help to prove the effectiveness of humor as a coping strategy.

A Concluding Remark

A survey was used to test the hypothesis that the use of humor in the classroom is effective in reducing stress and tension of both students and teachers and is; therefore, an important classroom management technique. The seven items of the survey assessed subject's agreement or disagreement with statements concerning humor's use and effectiveness in coping with tense school situations. The premise behind this procedure was that the greater percentage of subjects who responded with the #4 (strongly agree) response the greater support for the hypothesis. The greater percentage of responses did fall in this category.

Both groups reported agreeing with statements concerning humor's coping abilities at a greater rate than disagreeing with such statements. Twice as many students agree with such statements rather than disagree, indicating use of this coping mechanism. Whereas, five times as many teachers reported agreement with than disagreement with the same statements. Such results help one to conclude that if such a large percentage of students and teachers report using humor in tense school situations, it must be an effective coping technique. After all, if the benefits were not present, why would so many people use humor to help them deal with trying times at school?

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

My hypothesis was that the use of humor in the classroom is effective in reducing stress and tension of both students and teachers and is; therefore, an important classroom management technique. Such a need to reduce stress within the classroom arises from the increasing levels of tension experienced by these young adults. With this mounting tension, the educator's job

is a complicated one. It would seem to be a fruitless effort to even attempt to teach without first reducing some of the student's stress. One way for a teacher to diffuse the stress is through effective classroom management.

The aim of this study was to explore one such method of management, that being the use of humor to reduce stress and tension. There exists a large body of research documenting the psychological as well as physiological benefits of humor as a stress reducer. This study aimed to extend these principles to apply to the classroom setting. As previously stated, an adapted version of Martin and Lefcourt's (1983) Coping Humor Scale was administered to ninety-eight students ages nine to eleven and twenty-three teachers.

My analysis showed that the majority of subjects from both groups agreed with the items dealing with humor's use in tense school situations as a means of coping. Seventy-nine percent of teachers agreed, either strongly or mildly, and 66% of students agreed. One may conclude from the results from the study that well over 50% of all subjects report using humor and

agreed with its effectiveness in reducing stress and tension.

A slightly larger percentage of teachers seem to report the use of humor as a coping mechanism than did students. This may simply be due to the factor of age. Perhaps these teachers who have already been students themselves, have had more experience with humor as a coping strategy and more practice with its use in relieving stress and tension. Maybe, this is a skill which develops over time with maturity and/or life experiences.

In addition, the nature of differences between the roles of the two groups may play a part in this discrepancy. Student's problems at school may range from grades, homework assignments, tests, etc. Whereas, teacher's problems may be discipline, time management, etc. While both groups have very real stresses present at school, students may see their problems as having a greater impact upon their lives. For example, grades may be very important to students and may have serious consequences for their future (ex. going to college). On the other hand, teacher's

stresses may be easier to separate from their lives outside of school and are; therefore, easier to leave behind at the end of the school day. Since these are job-related stresses, they may be more easily alleviated by laughter since they do not pose a threat to the teacher's lives outside of the classroom. The students may view their problems as more "important" and; therefore, more difficult to ease with humor.

The results seem to have important implications for teachers when deciding upon classroom management. If the classroom becomes a tense, negative environment, students will have difficulties learning. When these young adults have so many sources of stress weighing on their minds, the definition of a noun or the square root of 100 are more than likely the farthest things from their minds. It seems so easy for the students to get so caught up in the stresses of grades, homework assignments, peer pressure, etc. that school becomes a negative place and experience for both them and the teachers. Therefore, one of the educator's main priorities should be transforming this situation and creating a positive learning environment.

The results from this study point to the use of humor to accomplish such a goal. If the source of disruption in the school lives of students is stress, the teacher needs to reduce or eliminate as much stress as possible. As stated in the results of this study, over 50% of the subjects reported using humor to help them cope with trying and difficult school times. One hundred percent of teachers and 66% of students directly reported that humor helps them cope with school problems (statement #7).

Although these percentages lend support for the hypothesis, they also present a challenge for teachers and parents. There still remain a rather large percentage of students from this sample who do not use this coping mechanism. This simply may be due to the fact that they have not yet been taught how to use this skill. It may also be due to other factors such as age, maturity, and lack of experience to show how humor is helpful in coping with stress. Based on the highly documented benefits, this would be an important skill to teach any child. It could help to decrease tension and increase classroom efficiency. In addition, there

may be far reaching benefits. As stated in the beginning of this study, a great deal of student stress comes from outside sources which educators may have no knowledge of or control over. Although we lack the power over these forces that cause such stress, we can still help to reduce them. By teaching children how to cope with school stress through the use of humor, teachers may be arming them with an effective weapon to combat the challenges which these children meet outside our classrooms.

As I feel that no study is 100% valid or without fault, this study was no exception. There are two points which I would like to address as important when interpreting the results. First, the ages of the students in this study is an important factor to consider when looking at the results. These students were in the upper elementary grades at the time this study was conducted. This may have had some impact upon the results. Such a coping device may not be as effective or even as necessary with younger students, such as those in the primary grades. Younger students may not feel as much stress overall and may not have

yet developed their humor usage as a coping technique. For older students, the use of humor as a stress reducer may be even greater than it was for the students in this sample. While these students are more likely to feel greater amounts of stress, they are also more likely to have more experience with the use and success of humor as a coping strategy in the school setting.

Secondly, as was discussed in the Analysis of Results section, outside factors may influence student's and teacher's reactions to situations. One such factor may be peer pressure or social norms concerning appropriate behavior. For example, with statement #5, more subjects agreed with the fact that it is better to laugh than cry in tense school situations. However, it may not be that they are necessarily using laughter as a coping strategy, but instead may be using it to avoid the possible ridicule which they may receive for crying. Such outside sources and variables which may play a role in determining responses should be considered when reviewing the data and results.

The results from the study support the use and effectiveness of humor as a strategy to cope with stress within the classroom. However, as was stated in the Review of Literature, not every form of humor is appropriate or effective. There do exist certain limitations and cautions to humor's usage. Similarly, several positive suggestions may be made to help educators maximize humor's potential as a classroom management technique.

Suggestions for the Teacher's Use of Humor Within the Classroom

The most important consideration concerning humor's use is your own personality. One should not try to imitate another's use of humor. Instead, make it as natural and spontaneous as possible. It should be nothing more than an extension of your normal style of interacting with others (McGhee, 1988). What this means basically is that you need to find a happy medium or balance to your use of humor. Use it appropriately rather than in a manner which is condescending (Kelly, 1983). The best form of humor is "that which grows or

develops naturally from a situation" (Kelly, 1983, p.6). Therefore, do not simply tell jokes or plan what you will say to make the class laugh. Rather, let it arise naturally from the situation and your personality.

Finally, be willing to laugh at yourself. Not only does this ease the tension, it also affirms your humanness and places the educator on the same level as the students (Harris, 1984). When used appropriately, the potential benefits of humor are endless. Based upon the findings of this study, I hope teachers will consider the use of humor as a classroom management technique within their own rooms to reduce tension and create a positive learning environment.

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Appendix A

Developmental Sequence of Humor

AGE	HUMOR BEHAVIOR
1 week	Smiles during sleep and in response to tactile stimulation.
2 months	Grins in response to configuration of human face.
4 months	Laughs when presented such stimuli as tickling, body contact, large toys, rhythmic or unexpected movements, teasing, and peekaboo games.
2-4 yrs.	Responds to perceptual incongruities such as distortions of objects and words; rhyming nonsense words are funny ("daddy addy" or "maddy saddy").
4-6 yrs.	Body functions, body noises, taboo words, clowning, silly rhyming, slapstick, chanting, and misnaming are funny. Enjoys simple riddles and word play with own name (Sticky Micky or Silly Sally). Responds to the social smile but has little capacity for sympathetic humor. Exaggerations of size and shape are funny, as is any form of surprise.
7-8 yrs.	Becomes aware of linguistic ambiguity and realizes that words and phrases cannot always be taken literally. This is the height of the practical joke period; others' discomfort is perceived as funny. Riddles and jokes are repeated incessantly. Enjoys stories in which animals behave like humans.
9-12 yrs.	At the beginning of this stage, concrete

puns, conventional jokes, word plays, and moron and knock-knock jokes are popular. Gradually sympathetic humor emerges, but there is still perseveration of things that strike them as funny: retelling jokes and doing stunts. Delights in anything that deviates from the norm, taboo subjects or things adults disapprove of. Begins to accept some jokes about self, can be teased. Marked increase in verbal humor over the previous stage. Toward the end of this stage, begins to learn to use humor for personal ends, including channeling negative feelings into positive humorous situations.

13+ yrs. Begins to reflect on "why" someone laughs and deprecates laughter that is unfeeling. Original good-natured humor, including sarcasm and self-ridicule, are appreciated. Tongue-in-cheek humor, social satire, and irony become preferred humor modes. Kidding, joking insults, loud laughter in public places may be observed. Forbidden topics are not laughed at in mixed company. Verbal wit is increasingly dominant over visual. Noticeable tendency to use humor to save face. Ability to parody may appear.

Source: Cornett, C.E. (1986). Learning through laughter: Humor in the classroom. (Report No. 210120). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 276028).

Appendix B

Please mark your survey questions by circling the number.
1-strongly disagree
2-mildly disagree
3-mildly agree
4-strongly agree

1. I often lose my sense of humor when I'm having problems.

   1 2 3 4

2. I have often found that my problems at school have been reduced when I tried to find something funny in them.

   1 2 3 4

3. I usually look for something comical to say when I am in tense situations at school.

   1 2 3 4

4. I must admit my school life would be easier if I had more of a sense of humor.

   1 2 3 4

5. I have often felt that if I am in a situation at school where I have to either cry or laugh, it is better to laugh.

   1 2 3 4

6. I can usually find something to laugh or joke about even in trying school situations.

   1 2 3 4

7. I have found that humor helps me cope with my school problems.

   1 2 3 4

Appendix C

Table 1: Number of Students who Selected Each Response

	item 1	item 2	item 3	item 4	item 5	item 6	item 7	
1	16	21	19	31	8	15	16	126
2	15	18	19	20	11	16	11	110
3	42	25	29	21	21	35	32	205
4	25	34	31	26	58	32	39	245

Table 2: Percentage of Students who Selected Each Response

	item 1	item 2	item 3	item 4	item 5	item 6	item 7	
1	16%	21%	19%	32%	8%	15%	16%	18%
2	15%	18%	19%	20%	11%	16%	11%	16%
3	43%	26%	30%	21%	21%	36%	33%	30%
4	26%	35%	32%	27%	59%	33%	40%	36%

Table 3: Number of Teachers who Selected Each Response

	item 1	item 2	item 3	item 4	item 5	item 6	item 7	
1	5	0	2	7	0	0	0	14
2	7	0	6	4	0	3	0	20
3	8	10	13	7	6	13	3	60
4	3	13	2	5	17	7	20	67

Table 4: Percentage of Teachers who Selected Each Response

	item 1	item 2	item 3	item 4	item 5	item 6	item 7	
1	22%	0%	9%	30%	0%	0%	0%	9%
2	30%	0%	26%	17%	0%	13%	0%	12%
3	35%	43%	57%	30%	26%	57%	13%	37%
4	13%	57%	9%	22%	74%	30%	87%	42%

Table 5: Number and Percentages of Combined Subjects who Selected Each Response

	item 1	item 2	item 3	item 4	item 5	item 6	item 7	
1	21 17%	21 17%	21 17%	38 31%	8 6%	15 12%	16 13%	140 16%
2	22 18%	18 15%	25 21%	24 20%	11 9%	19 16%	11 9%	130 15%
3	50 41%	35 29%	42 35%	28 23%	27 22%	48 40%	35 29%	265 31%
4	28 23%	47 39%	33 27%	31 26%	75 62%	39 32%	59 49%	312 37%

Table 6: Total Percentage of Teachers vs. Students who Selected Each Response

	1	2	3	4
teachers	9%	12%	37%	42%
students	18%	16%	30%	36%